

Pastor T.C. Arnold
3rd Sunday in Epiphany
Romans 1:8-17
January 27th, 2019

In Paul's letters to the churches spread throughout Asia Minor, nineteen different times he mentions that he is praying for them. We might think that's a lot. Or, maybe you think it should have been more. I mean, it's common for Christians to tell people that we are praying for them. When we hear bad news about the family, we say, "You are in my prayers." When your friend comes to you and says, "I've really been struggling at work these past days," our response is, "your challenges are in my prayers." When your neighbor tells you that a family member is very sick, or maybe even at death's door, we comfort them with the words, "your sister, your brother, your mother or your father is close to my heart in prayer."

All the times we tell others we are praying for them... we write it in an email, we mention it in a special card we send. As a pastor, I'm not even sure how many times I say this to others... yet each time I mean it. So we don't just say it, we pray it. We take these petitions before our heavenly Father knowing that they are heard... knowing that God takes seriously all that we bring before His throne. We even make special time to have prayers of the church publically at the Divine Service, like today. And other portions of the liturgy could also be considered our prayers that are lifted up before God – imploring Him to take action... to be with us... to make a difference.

When Paul writes about his prayers for the church, there is one type of prayer he seems to always say. And I wonder, if this prayer should always be the prayer that is on our lips as well. He says, like he does here in the Epistle text for today, "*FIRST, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you...*" Then, he gives the reason. And this reason is what separates the faithful from the unbelieving world. The reason is: "*because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.*" Paul says he gives thanks for their faith.

Notice what he did NOT say. He didn't say, "I give thanks for all your good works done in Rome for the sake of the poor and needy." He did not say, "I give thanks for your beautiful houses of worship and the way your voices sound when you sing praises to God." Paul did not say, "I give thanks for your offerings, you really stepped it up this year and you made budget. Keep up the good work." No, rather, Paul says, "*I thank my God... because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.*" Paul gives thanks for faith and the fact that it was being told to the ends of the earth.

Now to the world, accomplishments matter. To the world deeds matter and those deeds come in all sorts of varieties. They come in the way we get our work done... and we get rewarded accordingly. If you are a good team you get a trophy for winning your league. If you are a good individual player you get a Most Valuable Player award. If you do a better job at work than others, you get a bonus or a promotion. If you are the best dad or mom in the world, you'll get a coffee mug that says so (you'll never get credit for being the best dad or mom). The world in which we live "gives thanks" (so to speak) for what you are able to do... to do for the company, the community, or even for yourself.

But I will stand with Paul. I will give thanks for all of you... because of your faith. The gift of the Holy Spirit poured out on you. I give thanks that God has given you this gift of faith because it is only by that faith, never what you did at work or even at home, that saves you from all unrighteousness. I give thanks with Paul for a community of believers who make their faith known doing good works in this congregation, by showing their faithfulness and stepping up to the plate, putting forth the effort... all for the proclamation of the Gospel. I give thanks for those Christians... that is, all of you... who are active... here for the sake of the spreading of the love of Jesus that others may believe on Him and receive His blessed gifts. Not because if you work hard enough, Christ Lutheran will be the best church

in the Northland. Not because if you do enough for Jesus, people will envy you because you belong to the biggest and the best church in the community. No, rather, you do it because you belong to Jesus... you have been made a child of God... and from this gift you overflow into the lives of others and they are loved by God through you.

So, that's the prayer of Paul for the church in Rome, and that is my prayer for all of you. But what about your prayers? How should you pray? Do you pray by "giving thanks" to God? Are those the first words out of your mouth? Should they be if they are not? Maybe you don't have much to be thankful for. You know, because times are tough. The despair of the circumstances you are faced with are overwhelming and God seems to have you linger within them, not pulling you out of the depths of grief, like you had asked for. You harbor bitterness and resentment toward God and thankfulness is not what comes to mind when you are talking to God... if you are talking to God.

Sadness, bitterness, resentment – even hurt, disappointment and anger come between us and others when relationships are strained. This is true with God and it's true with our neighbors. Someone we care about says an offensive word and our feelings are hurt. It's interesting that in this day and age, people are hurt more by offensive words. I know our world is more sensitive but I also think this is a product of the way we communicate. So much of our communication with others is through a message we send on the computer or social media. There is so much information out there... we have said so much... so there is so much more to get us offended. And, we have no opportunity to really understand each other through messages on the computer. We don't have the opportunity, or don't give others the opportunity, to explain what they mean, why they said what they said, and how they really feel. So much is lost without face to face conversation because we cannot see their face when they talk or can't hear out their rationale. The altering of communication in this way has hurt so many loving relationships because people don't take the time to sit down with others and talk.

So it is with our relationship with God. If we are uninformed about prayer, if we know not the ways of our Lord, if we don't understand how He communicates to us, we may give up, not speak to Him again, and hold a grudge. This is especially easy to do when we suffer.

This is why Paul gives thanks, first, for faith and the spread of that faith to the world. Faith holds on to the promise that God speaks to us in His Word and it is through that Word that He has shown us who He is. That in the Word, we are not lost in our sufferings... that we are "let go" by Him when He chastises us because of our misdeeds... that even though we experience hardships, our God knows hardship to every degree and that He endured so that one day you will overcome. God talks to us face to face as He gives us the words to pray in the Scriptures... When men like Paul give thanks for a church in Rome that had far more problems than Christ Lutheran... or any other church for that matter. Paul grafts us into a relationship of thanksgiving with others... and gives us the example that we give thanks for what matters most – faith!!!

Beloved, there is much for which to give thanks – even in the midst of life's struggles. Give thanks that you are a Christian – you are chosen by God – you are a royal priesthood – you are loved, forgiven, an inheritor of the eternal blessings won on the cross for you. Give thanks that this place is here for you... God's gifts from the altar... God's blessings through your neighbor on the right and on the left. The Psalmist says, and we do too in our blessings... "*Give thanks unto the Lord for His is good, and His mercy endures forever.*"

FIRST, I thank my God... for your faith... for the going out of your faith. Because this is how we are loved... how we are saved... by grace through FAITH. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.